All Quiet on the Western Front: Introduction

Published in 1929, All Quiet on the Western Front masterfully depicts the horror of war. Erich Maria Remarque based the book on his own experience as a young infantryman in the German army during World War I, and was partially influenced by Henri Barbusse's "Le Feu Journal d'une Escouade." (1916) a war novel published while the war was still being fought. His avowed purpose in writing the novel was "to report on a generation that was destroyed by the war—even when it escaped the shells." More than a million copies of the book were sold in Germany the first year it appeared, followed by millions more when translated and distributed in the other nations. However, Nazi Germany took away Remarque's citizenship in 1938. Later on, he became a citizen of Switzerland and the United States. Though Remarque published ten novels and various screenplays, he was known primarily as the author of this novel.

The story is about a lost generation, as seen through the eyes of Paul Baumer, a nineteen-year-old German volunteer, during the last two years of World War I. The book alternates between periods at the Western front and peaceful interludes, horrifying battles and scenes of young comrades passing time together, episodes in the field hospital and at home on furlough. Fresh out of high school, Paul and his classmates idealistically enter military service, but the realities of war soon transform Paul and his comrades into "old folk" and "wild beasts." War destroys these men: their hope in a seemingly hopeless situation attests to the endurance of the human spirit.

In his vivid chronicling of the infantryman's view of the German experience in this century, the book found a major audience in non-German readers; Remarque's episodic style and use of both the first person and present tense endowed the novel, published in German as Im Westen nichts Neues, with an eyewitness authenticity and added to its enduring appeal.

All Quiet on the Western Front | Author Biography

Erich Maria Remarque is considered one of the most significant war novelists in contemporary literature. In his works, he displayed his concern for the physical and spiritual effects of the First World War on a generation in Germany. Born in Osnabruck, Germany on June 22, 1908, Remarque came from a poor family; his father, Peter Franz Remark, was a bookbinder who supported Erich, his mother Anna Maria, and two sisters. The writer took the name of his mother and the spelling of his family name, Remarque, from his French ancestors. At school, he clashed with authorities (whom he later criticized in his character Kantorek). Remarque began writing at sixteen years of age and published his essays, poems, and an early novel later in Die Traumbude or "The Dream Room" (1920). Though he began training as an elementary school teacher at the University of Munster, he was unable to finish, since he was drafted at the age of nineteen into the German army to serve on the Western front. Wounded five times, Remarque, like his protagonist, Paul Baumer, swallowed poison gas and sustained injury to his lungs. Both visited their mother, to whom they were close, during leave. The similarity ends there, of
course, since Baumer makes the ultimate sacrifice. However, shortly after Remarque returned home from duty, his mother passed away in September, 1917.

Only months earlier, Remarque participated in the Battle of Flanders against the British. While carrying a wounded comrade back from the attack, he suffered shrapnel wounds that sent him to a hospital in Germany. He spent most of the war recuperating, writing music, and working on *Die Traumbude*. After his discharge in 1918, he suffered postwar trauma and disillusionment, complicated by regret that his wounds ended his hopes for a career as a concert pianist as well as by grief over his mother's death. He worked in a variety of positions ranging from an itinerant peddler and organist in an insane asylum to an advertising copywriter. He then moved to Berlin in 1925, where he wrote about car races in and edited the magazine *Sport im Bild* while continuing to write fiction. Remarque married a dancer, Jutta Zambona. Drawn to local social events, he developed a reputation for high living.

In *Westen nichts Neues* (literally "In the West, nothing new"), his first and most famous work of fiction, was written in five weeks in 1927. Following serial publication in a magazine, the book was published in January 1929. The publishers were initially skeptical of the postwar reaction to the book, wondering if readers were still interested in World War I. However, a half-million copies were sold in Germany within three months. After eighteen months, the worldwide sales totalled three-and-a-half million copies.

With achieving fame and fortune, Remarque began to live an upscale lifestyle. He bought a Lancia convertible and moved to Casa Remarque in Porto Ronco, on Switzerland's Lake Maggiore. He ended his marriage but still lived with his wife. Though he lived among priceless paintings and antique Egyptian artifacts, Remarque was unable to avoid the hatred against him by a new force in his native country. In 1933, the National Socialist Party came to power in Germany. Hitler's propagandist, Josef Goebbels, plotted to punish the writer for his anti-war sentiments. In the Obernplatz, facing Berlin's opera house, Goebbels burned Remarque's book and the film that was based on it along with books by Thomas Mann, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Maxim Gorki, Bertolt Brecht, and Albert Einstein. Shortly before Hitler invaded Poland, Remarque fled the Gestapo by escaping through France and sailing to America on the Queen Mary. Unfortunately, his sister was murdered by the Nazis, for which he felt personally guilty for the rest of his life.

When Remarque arrived in New York, he was a literary star. Along with other writers in self-imposed exile, he continued to write about the war, worked for various movie studios, and settled in a colony of German expatriates in west Los Angeles until 1942. Remarque became a U.S. citizen in 1947 and married actress Paulette Goddard in 1958. After 1960, he spent more and more time in Italy and returned less often to the U.S. He was awarded the Great Order of Merit of Germany. He wrote ten books after his best seller, but none of them received the acclaim of *All Quiet*. A sequel, *The Road Back*, recounts the collapse of the German army and the efforts of returning soldiers to adjust to civilian life.

Remarque died of a heart attack on Sept. 24, 1970 in Locarno, Switzerland. In Germany, he was described as a successful writer of pulp love stories and popular thrillers but was recognized abroad as the chronicler of German destiny from 1914 through 1945. Above all, he was lauded as the writer of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. 
Individual vs. Machine
The patriotism of war is a thing of the past, Remarque suggests, as the young recruits quickly learn about the reality of trench warfare. Paul Baumer, fresh from school at the beginning of the novel, is sent after skimpy but brutal basic training to the trenches in France. He quickly learns that living or dying has little to do with one's prowess as a soldier but more as a conditioned reflex. Since the Allies outgunned the Axis in artillery and machinery, the German youth took refuge in trenches that were no match for the kind of warfare waged. As more and more of his comrades are killed, Baumer sees that death comes from afar in the artillery shells and the bombs, and as the trenches offer less and less refuge from the other side's new tanks and airplanes and its better guns, survival becomes little more than a chance.

Thus, the theme of *All Quiet on the Western Front* is the individual's struggle against forces beyond his control: technology, institutions, politics, social conventions, disease, and death. The soldiers become automatata, trying to avoid death more than actually fighting. Rapid changes of scene take the reader to the front—sheltering from shell-fire in a cemetery, under gas attack, behind the lines—on leave to a Germany that cannot conceive of life at the front, into contact with Russian POWs, and to the hospital, where the consequences of war are among the severest and clearest. The increasingly condensed final chapters show the young German troops defeated in the field, clearly unable to win in the face of livelier and better fed Allied troops, and Baumer dies before the actual armistice. His death in the end, the author seems to say, is not even worth reporting.

The atmosphere of death, the callousness of Muller's request for Kemmerich's boots, the theft of his watch, and the eagerness of a soldier to exchange cigarettes for morphine to aid a dying soldier add to the theme of the absurdity of modern existence, where man is forced to combat impersonal mechanistic forces.

Friendship
The one element that retains its positive value in the novel is friendship between the comrades. A difference in generation developed, and ties between the young soldiers solidified. Carl Zuckmayer, a playwright and friend of Remarque, writes in *A Part of Myself*, "The heroic gestures of the volunteers was barred to Erich Maria Remarque and his age group; they had to sweat out their normal time in school and then be unwillingly drafted, drilled, and harassed, and they went into the field without illusions, for they had some inkling of the horrors that awaited them there. For us the brief training period was a strenuous but also an amusing transition, a great joke, much as if we were playing parts in a highly realistic military comedy."

Alienation and Loneliness
Paul retreats from civilian life into the isolated world of the soldier. Following his leave, he grieves over his second departure to the front, which separates him from his mother. He is sad to lose his friends. In the same vein, the wistful, elegiac mood persists in the novel in the allusions to the lost generation. Paul accepts the fact that his generation is burned out and emotionally stifled. During his guard duty, he sees men scurry in terror in a rat-infested trench as they hide next to cadavers of their comrades. Chapter 12, the last, is a compelling existential cry of abandonment. Paul perceives his generation as "weary, broken, burnt out, rootless, and without hope." Against a red rowan tree, he sees nature through new, objective eyes. "I am so alone," he concludes, lacking a will to live.

When Baumer returns home on leave, he is unable to identify with memories of his youth nor understand the patriotic enthusiasm of the older generation. The lost generation essentially includes the students whose youth is cut short and ruined.
**All Quiet on the Western Front | Historical Context**

**World War I**
Named for its complex involvement of countries from Northern Europe to Africa, western Asia, and the U.S., World War I, called the Great War, was ignited by a single episode. On June 28, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo, Bosnia. As the Austrian government plotted a suitable retribution against the Serbs, the effect on Russia was taken into consideration. Because Russia was closely allied with Serbia, Austrian officials worried that the slightest aggression against the Serbs would result in Russian involvement. As a precaution, Austria sought support from Germany, its most powerful ally. Kaiser Wilhelm II immediately vouched for Germany's assistance, telling the Austrian powers that his nation would support whatever action the Austrian government might take.

On July 23, 1914, the Austrian empire presented an ultimatum to the Serbs, demanding that they suppress Serbian nationalist activity by punishing activists, prosecuting terrorists, squashing anti-Austrian propaganda, and even allowing Austrian officials to intrude into Serbian military affairs. Two hours before the expiration of the forty-eight hour deadline on the ultimatum, Serbia responded. However, its response fell short of complete acceptance of the terms and so was rejected by the Austrian authorities. As war between Austria and Serbia loomed on the horizon, both sides experienced a massive groundswell of optimism and patriotism regarding the impending conflict.

The Austrians declared war on Serbia and began shelling Serbian defenses. As these aggressions began, the Russian army started mobilizing to aid the Serbs, and it was soon clear that Russia was going to become involved in the war. Two days later, the German army began to mobilize and entered the war to support Austria. Germany was jubilant about the prospect of war and believed that its entrance into the conflict was perfectly justified. Kaiser Wilhelm II stated: "A fateful hour has fallen upon Germany. Envious people on all sides are compelling us to resort to a just defense ... war will demand enormous sacrifices in blood and treasure but we shall show our foes what it means to provoke Germany."

Germany began a heavy assault on France, an ally of the Russians. To facilitate this assault, the German troops marched through Belgium. Great Britain, Belgium's ally, sent an ultimatum to the German army to withdraw from Belgian soil. When the ultimatum went unanswered, Britain entered the war, which had already included Czechs, Poles, Rumanians, Russians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Arabs, and eventually the Italians and Turks. Germany faced Russian, French, and British enemies, who outnumbered their army 10 million to 6 million.

**War in the Trenches**
As Germany engaged the French and British armies in the West, it became clear that a decisive victory was not an immediate possibility. Both sides in the conflict settled themselves into trenches and dugouts in preparation for a war of attrition. New weapons such as the machine gun and more efficient artillery made the trenches a necessity. Soldiers on open ground would be decimated by the newfangled instruments of death. Opposing trenches were typically several hundred yards apart. The middle ground, which was laced with barbed wire, soon became known as "no-man's land." Constant firefight and artillery barrages removed all foliage from this area and made it nearly impossible to cross. Daring raids across this deadly no-man's land became one of the chief pursuits of infantrymen in the trenches. During these raids, soldiers would cross the treacherous ground, penetrating enemy barbed wire either with well-placed artillery attacks or with special rifle attachments that gathered several strands of wire together and the fired a bullet, severing them. Upon reaching the enemy lines, soldiers would first throw...
a volley of hand grenades into the trenches and then attack the surprised defenders with bayonets. While these raids did not typically result in major casualties to defenders, they devastated enemy morale and bolstered the confidence of the attackers. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul Baumer participates in such a raid. Caught in a no-man's land by shell-fire, Baumer takes shelter in a shallow hole. When a French soldier also seeks shelter there, Baumer stabs him and feels tormented by guilt as he watches the young man die. This scene especially illustrates the traumatic nature of the raids.

**The Western Front**
The Western front was a 475-mile-long battle line between the Germans and the Allied forces. Along this line of fighting were 900,000 German troops and 1.2 million Allied soldiers, or roughly 1,900 and 2,500 men per mile of front. Overall, the western front was not a continuous trench, but rather a string of unconnected trenches and fortifications. The round of duty along the Western front differed little for soldier on either side of the conflict. Most of the night would be spent at hard labor, repairing the trench wall, laying barbed wire, and packing sandbags. After the dawn stand-to, when every man would line up on the firing step against the possibility of a morning attack, the rest of the day would generally be spent in sleep or idleness, occasionally interrupted by sentry duty or another stand-to when enemy activity was suspected. Despite the sometimes lengthy periods of calm along the front, life in the trenches was filled with constant dangers. In addition to artillery attacks and surprise raids, soldiers suffered ailments brought on by a daily existence in wet and unsanitary conditions. The lack of fresh foods and soggy environment in the trenches resulted in "trench foot," an affliction that turned the feet green, swollen, and painful. Another ailment suffered by soldiers in the trenches was the debilitating, though not fatal, trench fever, transmitted by the lice that infested everyone after a day or two in the line. Baumer and his comrades in the novel take several trips to the delousing stations during their service on the front.

**The Human Cost of the War**
On the Allies side, the total casualties suffered were as follows: Russia, 9,150,000; England, 3,190,235; France, 6,160,000; Italy, 2,197,000; the U.S., 323,018; and Serbia, 331,106. On the Axis side, Germany lost 7,142,558; and Austria-Hungary, 7,020,000.

**The Influence of the Older Generation**
Central to Remarque's novel is the attack on members of Germany's older generation for imposing their false ideals of war on their children. The older generation's notions of a patriotism and their assumptions that war was indeed a valorous pursuit played a crucial role in the conflict. The chief sources of this pro-war ideology were the older men of the nation: professor, publicists, politicians, and even pastors. As the war began, these figures intensified the rhetoric, providing all the right reasons why killing the young men of France and Britain was a worthy endeavor. One Protestant clergyman spoke of the war as "the magnificent preserver and rejuvenator." Government authorities in Germany did everything in their power to try and get the young men to enlist, even granting students special dispensation to complete final exams early so as to be able to join up sooner. As the war broke out, more than a million young men volunteered for service.

In his book, Remarque uses the character of the schoolteacher Kantorek to develop the novel's attack against the older generation. Kantorek's persistent encouragement of the young men to enlist prompted Baumer's entire class to volunteer for service. With each successive death of Baumer's classmates, the novel further condemns the attitudes and influences of the older generation. Baumer himself denounces the pressure they exerted. "For us lads of eighteen," he observes, "they ought to have been mediators and guides to the world of maturity, the world of work, of duty, of culture, of progress—to the future."

**All Quiet on the Western Front | Critical Overview**
When Erich Maria Remarque published his first novel serially in Berlin's magazine *Vossische Zeitung* (November 10 to December 9, 1928), he immediately aroused interest. Politically, he was considered a rather courageous new writer who dared to question the mechanical militaristic tendencies of the German state, and, artistically, he possessed a facility in written expression that used various rhetorical devices in an impressionistic mode. In short, he could not be perceived by his reading public as a run-of-the-mill war novel romantic. The work appeared the next year in English and sold a million and a half copies that same year and in time was translated into twenty-nine languages.

Initially, the book was enthusiastically received by critics for its realistic presentation of the war and what it meant to the average soldier. Joseph Wood Krutch of *Nation* centered his commentary on Remarque, noting that the author spoke from experience and that he avoided rhetoric (artificial eloquence in speech or writing) and analysis in favor of a simplicity so devastating "as to make the unspeakable commonplace." Favorable reviews also came from such luminaries as William Faulkner, Maxwell Geismar, and Bernard DeVoto. Louis Kronenberger, commenting in the *New York Times Book Review*, called the soldier's experience a kind of "Everyman's pilgrimage," a compressed and intensive coming-of-age story.

Clearly, Remarque's journalistic training contributed to the popular appeal of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. According to Brian A. Rowley, the book's "particular blend of suffering, sensuality and sentiment suggests that Remarque had gauged public taste. The horror and degradation of war is represented, but it is shown with irony, wit, and even humor." Remarque's command of "a clear but lively, indeed pungent, style," says the critic, "owe something to journalism."

On the other hand, contemporary critics of Remarque faulted his work for its first-person narrative style, sensationalism, and distortion. His work was also parodied. Yet the historical nature of this criticism reflects the fact that the work is not a piece of historical documentation from 1917, but a novel written in 1928. Remarque's preface is telling in this case. While it declares the novel to be a report on the generation destroyed by the war (whether or not they survived physically), the bulk of the preface portrays the war through the eyes of a sensitive and literary young man.

Eventually, *All Quiet on the Western Front* was attacked by certain factions in Europe, censored by the Nazis, and publicly burned by their regime in 1933 for its pacifist denunciation of the war. Remarque was accused of being a Marxist sympathizer, who besmirched the memory of heroes killed on the World War I battlefields. In 1938, Nazi Germany deprived Remarque of German citizenship. While he received hefty royalties, he received few honors, since a percentage of the German population continued to perceive his novel as denigrating German militarism.

Later twentieth-century criticism carries with it the perspective of greater cataclysms—World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf War—and the advent of more horrific and powerful weapons, including the atom bomb, biological warfare, and computerized missiles. Rowley views Remarque's novel as a gradual "alienation from any world but that of war ... the sterility of [Baumer's] leave." Biographers Christine R. Barker and R.W. Last note that "Remarque succeeded in transcending his own personal situation; he touched on a nerve of his time, reflecting the experiences of a whole generation of young men on whom the war had left an indelible mark." Modris Eksteins observes that the book merged with the *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the time) of 1929, when "war survivors searched for answers to their inmost disquietude." From a structural point of view, critics classify the book as a *roman a clef* (a thinly veiled autobiographical story), a *stationroman* (a book that centers on themes, without a plot), and a *bildungsroman* (the personal growth of the main character). German critic Hans Wagener finds that any reading of the novel requires an understanding of the time in which it was
written and when it took place, and, as most critics concur, consider the book to be simply one of the best, if not the best, antiwar, pacifist novels ever written.

All Quiet on the Western Front | Style

Point of View
Remarque has been praised for the simple, direct language of his war novels in contrast to their often violent subject matter; he is also acknowledged for his ability to create moving, realistic characters and situations. His prose style is punctuated with fragmented narrative passages that mirror Paul's often disoriented state of mind. The plot moves in a "bildungsroman" format, demonstrating a young man's personal development. There are impressionist details that move in tableau fashion. Remarque's choice of a first-person narrator does, however, create one possible problem: the two concluding paragraphs have to stem from a new, apparently omniscient third-person narrator whose intervention is needed after the death of the first-person narrator. The story does not suffer from this change of viewpoint or from the absence of any explanation of the mechanics by which it came to be set down.

The narrative stance provides Remarque with a realistic context for a naive and simple style, which is part of the novel's popular appeal, as well as a fragmented, uncoordinated syntax and use of the present tense, a form that reflects immediacy; these features thus became part of the famous 'frog's eye view' of the war. He is able to comment on events through Paul Baumer himself—and through him of the other characters—without the need to provide an omniscient narrative perspective: indeed with a requirement not to do so. Style and point of view are matched, and both reflect the incomprehensibility of war.

Structure
Narrative viewpoint and the focus on the central character are also closely linked with structure. The work is divided into small sections, separated by asterisks. This feature makes it easier to read but it also makes for a realistic effect—that of a journal entry or a brief conversation. The novel operates structurally, in fact, on an alternation between the cruelty and despair of the battle scenes, and a gradual return to life during periods in reserve. The book is divided into short episodes and has a heavy reliance on conversation, characteristic of Remarque's style in general.

Description alternates with speculative passages by Baumer, and there are inconclusive discussions on the futility of the whole war. There are no historical details, certainly no heroics, and not even a real enemy except death, although Baumer is forced to kill an equally terrified Frenchman.

Setting
Though the novel is set during World War I, in the northern Belgian border between Langemark and Bixschoote, Flanders, Remarque does not really present the conflict of a war between the Germans and Allied forces. The battles are almost never identified and dates are rarely given; he writes of "the troops over there" more often than he does of specific nationalities, for they are not the real enemy. Speaking in a foxhole in no-man's land to the Frenchman he has killed, Paul blames the carnage on the desire for profit and on "national interest" as defined by authorities and institutions on both sides.

Imagery
The symbols in the novel are mundane yet striking: for example, the soldiers' boots, which pass from one man to the next as each man dies violently; and potato cakes, which represent home and comfort to Paul. Indeed, the boots pass from Kemmerich to Muller to Tjaden to Paul (and thus foreshadow his death). For Baumer, the trenches represent the antithesis of the fragile, gentle, and ever-present beauty
of nature, the "lost world of beauty." On the other hand, nature, in the form of butterflies and poplar trees, provides Paul with a reminder of innocence and peace.

Remarque also employs personification—endowing inanimate objects with human qualities—to describe the wind (playing with the soldiers' hair), and the darkness that blackens the night with giant strides. An example of his use of simile is his description of a man collapsing like a rotten tree. Apostrophes like "Ah, mother, mother! You still think I am a child—why can I not put my head in your lap and weep?" evoke the epic tragedies of ancient Greece.

**All Quiet on the Western Front | Paul Baumer**

The sensitive twenty-year-old narrator (he has written poems and a play called "Saul") reaches manhood through three years of service as a soldier in the second company of the German army during World War I. His loss of innocence during the cataclysm is the focus of the author's anti-war sentiment. If one views this book as a roman a clef (a thinly veiled autobiographical novel), he is telling the basic story of Erich Maria Remarque. Although he feels cut off and alienated from past values two years after the war begins, Paul is compassionate to his dying friends. In camaraderie, the author suggests, is salvation. One by one, Paul sees his comrades die; he also stabs a French soldier, a death that torments him profoundly. He is killed by a stray bullet just before the declaration of the armistice. Critics differ on the degree to which Baumer is Remarque, but the general consensus is that Paul Baumer is foremost a fictional creation who recounts a story that evokes the absurdity of war.